The "lost generation" and the challenges of working with marginalised groups. Learnt lessons from Brazilian Favelas

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The "lost generation" and the challenges in working with marginalised groups. Learnt lessons from Brazilian Favelas

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the challenges involving research and action within marginalised youngsters. It is based on our experience in the favelas in Rio de Janeiro. The paper will focus on the socio-symbolical depreciation of favelas and the criminalization of youngsters as part of the challenges in engaging with these groups.
We start with a contextualization of urban marginality in Rio. It will be followed by its impact on research agenda and the need to develop new approaches and methods in order to work with marginalised groups. We then illustrate with some examples from our experiences in the favelas.
We conclude that work with marginalised groups demands a 'positive and dynamic approach' based on a reflexive process that requires the researcher/professional to challenge their own professional identity, values and perceptions of social reality and 'the other' which institutions should give special attention to.

Initial words

Understanding the lives of marginalised people requires a sense of engagement which is more than 'research' and 'intervention' as part of a socio-political engagement with a cause. Marginality is not solely a matter of a 'research theme'. It is part of a complex social dynamic that results in suffering for people who are usually identified as 'research participants' and 'service users'. As part of this, research and work with marginalised groups is part of a choice based on a sense of humanity, indignation with the *status quo* and the will to change people's lives. Furthermore, it is not possible to work with the issues of marginality without pursuing social change and, by extension, it is not possible to change the social reality without a significant commitment to the cause which mobilises us as citizens and human beings before 'researchers' and 'professionals'. Such mobilisation sits in the same manner Paulo Freire (Freire and Horton 1990) considers the role of the educator. As he says, 'the educator has the duty of not being neutral.'

In fact, every aspect of professional engagement should be understood as part of an educational process in which our position as educator is mobilised by a transformative intervention in the world. In a similar way we agree with Wacquant that ethnographic research has to help to break intellectual and political hegemonies that underlay social domination and stratification (Wacquant 2002; 2001).

To engage with such commitment a researcher or professional must develop a sensitive perception of people and the place where they live. It is necessary to incorporate filters in our lenses that enable us to see things with different eyes, and to communicate with people in an engaged and humanised way. Such words may sound common sense. However it is never too much to remember some basics when we still see lots of 'researchers' and 'professionals' exercising their 'authority' in such a sensitive area of knowledge, intervention and socio-political engagement.

Research and work with particular groups is challenging and involves some choices that may confront idealised research methods and professional practice. This also requires us to confront our own identities, our values and our perceptions of social reality and 'the others'. It has a clear implication of an intellectual and professional activism that is sometimes replaced by the false idea of 'neutrality' as well as 'academic purism'. As Cornwall and Jewkes (1995, 1674) point out, 'changing relations between researcher and who participate in research involves political and personal transformations'. As part of this, in this paper we explore those challenges that sit on deconstruction of social representations, reframing of professional judgements and the need to rethink the traditional ways 'researchers' and 'professionals' approach the field and people.

These challenges inevitably involve a reflection upon the way institutions engage with social justice agenda. This is particularly relevant for the universities as they are institutions addressing research and teaching and, ultimately, the formation of professionals. In times of instrumentalisation of learning, universities' agendas for social justice should involve the responsibility of educating students to perform a morally responsible political authority (Giroux 2010).

About this paper

This paper is based on several years of direct experience of research and work in Brazilian favelas. It has involved direct contact with people's everyday reality in a daily immersion in life in favelas. It has also involved the development of approaches that allowed a reflexive process in a dialogical interaction with marginalised groups in recognition of their life experience and accumulated knowledge. It sits within and beyond a participatory research approach, with a clear understanding of a radical intervention in the world (Freire 2005). The opportunity to work in organisations with cutting edge views that addressed research into their action agenda has been also a relevant aspect of such experience.

We will use a descriptive and reflexive approach upon our experience in Brazil. Singularities of Brazilian socio-cultural context as well as the conditions we worked with will be essential elements to situate our thoughts. We will try to connect such experience with the challenges in working with marginalised groups in a more general sense in order to provide a reflexive

framework in support to researchers and practitioners aiming to adopt the Brazilian experience into their work. In doing so, we will offer a mix of lessons learnt both from research and work experience with marginalised groups.

This paper draws on the challenges in working with groups that are widely identified as worthless and criminals. We will pay special attention to their socio-symbolical depreciation and criminalization as part of a wider contextualization of the contemporary elements of the 'advanced marginality' (Wacquant 1999; 2001) in Brazil. We will focus on youngsters involved in drug trafficking gangs to illustrate the imbrication between social representations and professional practice and institutional attitudes. For that we will draw on our experiences in the Escape Routes project which has provided us a unique intellectual and professional framework. The Escape Routes project was developed by the NGO Observatory of Favelas, and funded by the International Labour Organisation, ICCO and UNICEF. It was a programme designed to develop innovative methodologies of research and intervention with youngsters involved in drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro. The project ran between 2004 and 2007. Our role in the project has involved co-ordination (Fernandes) and design and delivery of direct intervention activities (such as workshops and counselling) in support to the creation of alternatives for youngsters who wanted to leave the gang (Rodriguez).[1]

The barriers of social representation

Since the early 2000's several studies produced a systematic understanding of the life of youngsters involved in drug trafficking in Brazil (Silva and Urani 2002; Dowdney 2003; Cruz Neto et al 2001; Silva et al 2009; Ramos 2009). In spite of this valuable effort such works have had limited understanding of the elements that compose the social representations of drug trafficking (and 'the drug dealer') that still remain in the mainstream society as well as in the professional practice and institutional attitudes towards this subject. These representations for instance, perpetuate the idea that it is impossible to leave drug trafficking.[2] In doing so, it reinforces the idea of a lost generation of youngsters that would not have any other perspective in their lives beyond arrest or death. As a result, some professionals and institutions believe that their interventions cannot do more than ameliorate the situation, rather than producing approaches and a level of engagement that leads to effective transformation of people's lives. This challenge has other implications such as the devaluation of that youngster's life as well as indifference towards their futures in a kind of predetermined destiny. In Brazil the strong roots of slavery and dictatorship still shapes wider societal views of 'the marginal'. Such perceptions are not irrelevant. They are actually key in overcoming the socio-symbolical position of some groups

[1] For more information see: Silva et al. (2009); Fernandes and Rodriguez (2009); Fernandes (2013a).

[2] Evidence show that when a gang member does not have a debit or a problem within the gang, 'bosses' are usually open to allow members to leave without any major onus (Silva et al. 2009). The challenge is how to support the way out process in which social representations have a strong influence both for people trying to help and for youngsters willing to leave.

in this society and, in some ways, transform the way professionals and institutions interact with them.

Studies on social representation and its impact on institutional attitudes and professional practices are of strategic importance in producing a critical mass that may contribute to changing views and practices from perception and design of programmes and policy. In fact, despite the relevance of in depth understanding of life experience in drug trafficking, there is a need to better understand the factors underpinning representations that sustain professionals' pre-conceptions on their 'object' of intervention as well as the self-stereotyping vision that gang members have on themselves. It includes not only the negative perceptions, but also the ideas that sustain the belief that is possible to change the situation. The first systematic study that explored the social representations of life in trafficking from the point of view of professionals and former traffickers was published only recently (Rodriguez 2013). Rodriguez has interviewed former drug dealers and professionals in order to understand their perceptions of drug trafficking in relation to the way out process. Her study wanted to show the different paths for the way out process that sit beyond the idea of a 'lost generation'.

Advances in policy and the limitations of public opinion

Brazil has been experiencing substantial advances in policy to tackle 'juvenile violence' and 'community violence' (Willadino et al. 2011). The National Plan for Public Security (launched in 2000) can be considered a benchmark for public security in Brazil. It has established the key guidelines for a new policy for security by focusing on the integration between security policy, social policy and community actions. It has involved different governmental bodies at all levels, private entities and civil society working in mutual collaboration. As part of this wider framework, in 2009 the Brazilian government created a programme with a focus on violence prevention for youths: the National Programme for Security with Citizenship (Pronasci). This is still running, and involves a series of projects focusing on specific needs of vulnerable youngsters.

Such initiatives were a result of pressure from the civil society, and were also a catalyst for wider public engagement in the theme of public security. Their advance in pushing forward a public agenda is unquestionable. However, there is still a big challenge involved in changing perceptions of stigmatised youngsters who are seen both as a reason for urban violence and passive victims of broader social processes (and by extension, easily manipulated and co-opted by crime). In addition, such views naturalize favelas as a place where youngsters will inevitably get involved with crime. Moreover, the superficial and fatalistic views of urban violence reproduced by the mass media increases social fear and, consequently, the social pressure to push governments toward tough responses (Ramos and Paiva 2007). Social fear has been a major driving force for public security in the cities resulting in the militarisation of urban development

agenda (Souza 2008) and the fragmentation of the socio-political and spatial fabric of cities (Souza 2000). As a result, it is observed that the reinforcement of stigma in a contradictory move between increased public (financial and political) investment in public security and increasing criminalisation of people living in favelas (Fernandes 2009). This is the background context in which social representations are built; and where professional practice and institutional attitudes are set.

Criminalisation and punishment are strategies adopted as part of wider perceptions of the favelas' dwellers. Their historical socio-symbolical depreciation as second-class citizens (or 'non-citizens' for some) has been reinforced during the eighties as a result of the 'war on drugs'. The implementation of the neoliberal agenda in the already precarious Brazilian state had pushed forward an agenda of criminalisation of the poor which has the criminal system at its heart. In this case, the police are a major agent playing a massive role of 'social cleaner' through violation of rights and explicit violence against those identified as 'criminals' and, by extension, the wider favelas' population. As reported by diverse sources (Human Rights Watch 2011; International Amnesty 2013) the physical elimination of groups associated with crime has been a common practice that still remains in the democratic state even after three decades from military dictatorship (Anhen 2007).

The making of favelas, and the socio-symbolic place of 'the marginal'

In our understanding, the condition of being marginal is, before being an economic or social condition, a symbolic condition. It is situated within a process of socio-symbolic denigration, homogenisation, labelling and targeting of undesirable groups. Looking at the reality of urban marginalisation, we need to consider the 'urban desolation' and the 'symbolic denigration' experienced in the 'territories of relegation' (Wacquant 2001) as a basis to reflect the construction of social representations and labelling that interfere with policy and practice targeting particular groups. As Wacquant suggests, it relates to 'how the daily experience of material dilapidation, ethno-racial seclusion, and socioeconomic marginality translates into the corrosion of the self, the rasping of interpersonal ties, and the skewing of public policy through the mediation of sulphurous cognition fastened onto a defamed place' (Wacquant 2010, 1).

The socio-symbolic denigration, homogenisation, labelling and targeting of favelas represents a historical process to delimitate physical and symbolic boundaries in the city (Fernandes, 2005; 2014). It involves a long-standing process of labelling a territory and its population with negative characteristics in a way to create a 'public enemy' and 'scapegoat' in society. In Rio de Janeiro, such a process has been based on the definition of favelas as a place of disorder, illness and crime (Abreu 1994), and is still sustained in a systematic process of criminalisation and penalisation over the recent decades. What is observed is a historical process of 'territorial

fixation' (Wacquant 2001) as a way to delimit a space of social control and spatial enclosure (Fernandes 2009; 2012).

Labelling the 'marginal'

The marginalised groups[3] we are describing here are members of a territorial entity, the favela. As a consequence their labelling is part of 'socio-spatial stigmatisation' (Fernandes 2009) that sits in the wider process of socio-symbolic homogenisation, labelling, and targeting of favelas and their inhabitants (Fernandes, 2014). This is a very important point because there is a very distinctive difference between the broader social representation of the 'drug dealer' and other categories of 'criminals' involved in the wider drug trade (Ramos and Musumeci 2005).

As Souza (1996) points out, drug trafficking in favelas is the very end of a complex network that involves two interconnected subsystems, the import-export-wholesale; and the retail system. While 'white collar' criminals operate in the first sub-system, favelas' criminal groups operate in the retail sub-system. However, it is the image of favelas' dealers that is widely represented as 'the drug dealer'. Consequently, when adopting a clear strategy of 'war on drugs', Brazilian authorities have a clear target: the 'flip-flop bandit' (Fernandes 2009; 2013a).

'Flip-flop bandits' are youngsters and adult youths living in the precarious illegal job market of drug trafficking. They are the most fragile members of the drug trade network. They are the first to be arrested, the first to die, and the ones who receive the worst wages. Such conditions are hidden as part of the construction of 'the drug dealer' social representation, making this particular group the most exposed by media coverage when crime is portrayed. This contradictory combination makes them a very undesirable group in the society, whose physical elimination is seen as a natural enterprise to be carried out by the police. Moreover, it reinforces the idea of 'wasted lives' (Bauman 2004) and 'lost generation' (Fernandes 2013a; 2014) and, by extension, worthless and disposable lives (Giroux, 2012). This is why massive numbers of deaths of youngsters from poor and black background is seen with indifference for a great parcel of Brazilian society. For them the death of those youngsters sadly means a relief rather than a reason to be ashamed as a society.

Developing sensitivity with an engaged and passionate approach to the 'worthless'

[3] We are aware that 'marginal groups' is a labelling that may not describe the condition of groups as well as their responses to marginalisation. Of course we do not see such groups as a passive result of broader socio-political and economic structures. However, it is clear that marginalisation is a form of oppression that sits in these structures and that interfere in the way some groups are related to wider society. As Mehretu et al. (2000, 90) points out, 'marginality is a complex condition of disadvantage which individuals and communities experience as a result of vulnerabilities that may arise from unfavourable environmental, cultural, social, political and economic factors.' However, it is important to highlight that such marginalisation has been acquiring new contours in the contemporary world, with the emergence of a new 'precariat' (Standing 2011). Such a process is clearly connected with the 'advanced marginality' outlined by Wacquant (1999) which in some aspects are also observed in Brazil (Wacquant 2008) where Souza (2008) prefers refer to the emergence of a 'hyper precariat'.

> 'Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause – the cause of liberation.' (Freire 2005, 89)

Those youngsters with 'worthless' lives were at the heart of our work in the Escape Routes project. Our challenge alongside several colleagues, and in particular with the institutions we worked for, was to develop approaches based on their value as human beings as well as to produce an in depth understanding of their life challenges from their own point of view.

Developing sensitivity and socio-political engagement was an essential part of this strategy. Such an enterprise, however, would not have been possible without the vision of the organisations we worked for: the Observatório de Favelas and the Redes da Maré. They have had a very important leadership role alongside other organisations in Rio and Brazil to reflect upon new social representations and practices to influence policy and the wider society in the particular theme of favelas.[4] They have also offered us a unique framework to develop research and action under an agenda based on values of mutual respect; valuation of life and humanisation of relationships; acknowledgement of knowledge built from life experience; and development of critical awareness.

Building the trust through humanization of youths involved in drug trafficking gangs

Trust is an underpinning element of a relationship in an engaged approach. This is particularly important if we consider the elements of interaction involved in the lifestyle of drug trafficking where members learn (most of times by concrete experiences) that they cannot rely on anyone. In drug trafficking trust demarks a narrow divide between life and death. The study by Rodriguez (2013) reveals that the betrayals suffered within the group are frequent and completely undermine the sense of confidence of its members in any person approaching them.

The work in favelas has shown us that the first challenges to be overcome are the ability to do a rapprochement with these groups and to obtain consent and to reach a compromise with them for conducting the research or project. If this first step is not done in a careful manner and with

[4] Both organisations are based in Favela da Maré, Rio de Janeiro. While Redes da Maré has a focus in Maré as a whole, the Observatory is based in Maré, but with actions that sit outwith the local community, including the coordination of national programmes. In fact, for the Observatory of Favelas it was a choice to settle inside a favela instead of operating from more central locations as most of organizations of similar nature. Such symbolism has had a very strong influence in both authors' professional development.
Both Observatory and Redes have similar roots. They were created by the same people, and share similar views. The key element in their work is the valuation of local knowledge by transforming local people so that they may have more pro-active roles. Both organisations have on their board people with very strong connections to poverty and marginalisation having themselves lived in such circumstances at some point of their lives. The incorporation of research into social activism was another very important element for these organisations and there was a clear view that such processes should incorporate 'critical pedagogy' (Freire 1989) and the idea of the 'organic intellectual' (Gramsci 1971) as underpinning references. In doing so, such organisations are prepared to develop high standard research with the necessary sensitivity to research and work in favelas. Such capacity is of vital importance in producing works with better impact by providing the necessary understanding of problems from the point of view of *insiders'*.

enough time, all the following stages may be compromised. The main issue is how to establish this first contact and gain their trust. One of the paths seems to be the way we see these youngsters and also the way we understand our own practice both as researchers and professionals.

In the case of young people involved in drug gangs, professionals need to adopt a perspective of *humanization of the gaze* (Rodriguez 2013) on these groups. This is very important in a context in which the generic idea of these youngsters is sustained by a de-humanised and demonised perspective. By humanising the gaze, they begin to see themselves beyond criminal life. When one sees human kindness, the focus of the work is on the human being and from there, the bond of trust is the key piece for any further work. But now we have another question: how to develop a view that opposes the hegemonic representations that are already present in society and that tells us that these young people do not have a way out beyond death or imprisonment?

According to Moscovici (1988) the hegemonic representations correspond to generalizing views about phenomenon of everyday life. They are more resistant to change and contribute strongly to perpetuate certain practices and ways of feeling/thinking. On the other hand, the social representations help us in building the sense of reality, composing systems of values that guide us to act in everyday life (Moscovici 2003).

As social representations are part of day-to-day life of these groups, the idea of a 'lost generation' (Fernandes 2013a) is quite common when we talk about those who are in drug trafficking. Such an idea is not only sustained by the wider society, but also by these youngsters themselves as part of their self-stigmatisation. Of course self-stigmatisation does not help in a life changing process. On the contrary, it reinforces the option for crime because it strengthens the idea that they were born to do this. By stigmatising themselves these young people express a conformism with the situation they are in and this result in a lack of perspective.

We have heard from youngsters that they needed support from people who wanted to get to know them closely; people who could help them without judging them; people able to understand their lives beyond the 'drug dealer' character – that 'monster with a rifle in his hands'. In other words, they are in search of people who are able to see them in a different manner, acknowledging their humanity. People who were able to see the violence (institutional, domestic, and symbolic) suffered before violence is committed.

Therefore, the research in this field should increase the knowledge in order to overcome social representations. It should also involve the underpinning basis for projects they take part in a way to overcome the symbolic and concrete barriers to their wider access to the life in the city and the full experience as a subject of rights (Fernandes 2009). Moreover, there is an urgent need to expand the views and the practices in order to make these groups feel more accepted by society.

This would increase their trust and self-confidence in following new routes in their lives. The practice of professionals acting directly engaged with these young people in contexts of extreme social inequality or even doing research is an important tool for the production of new perspectives on this phenomenon. Delving deeply in this world of drug gangs has taught us the importance of avoiding prejudicial stereotypes on marginalised groups in the city. The reason is simple: because these definitions are based solely on polarized visions, of good versus evil, they usually focus only on one side of the coin. Therefore, either the youngster is seen as a clear threat to society or at the opposite end, they are seen as a victim of the social and economic system that produced it. Both of these explanations must involve more aspects in order to allow those intervening to produce satisfactory results which are consistent with the complexity of the problem.

The professional beyond the institutional walls

Professionals and specialists play a relevant role either on the reinforcement or breakdown of socio-symbolical marginalisation. Their capacity to be open, flexible and to adopt good sense is important to contrast with institutional rules and, in some way, change institutions from the inside. Similarly, institutions whose values and beliefs enable creativity and engagement, offer opportunities for cutting edge transformative practices. The first step is to break down physical and symbolical barriers that prevent humanised approaches. This is the reason why professionals and researchers should not be confined by the physical and organisational constraints of institutions. Immersion in the communities helps to build a bond of trust that enables access to a wide variety of situations which would not be attainable by a using more formal approach.

We understand that it is necessary to make the familiar unfamiliar (Velho 1978) as a way of identifying and analysing issues without allowing us to be carried away by our emotions and by views that prevent a broad view of the situation. However, if the professional/researcher distance themselves too much from the situation, it may prevent them from being able to 'feel' the problem with the necessary sensitivity. We believe that when the problem/subject does not touch our soul, our body and mind are unable to respond in a committed and passionate manner, allowing room for cold and mechanical approaches which must be avoided. So, there is a strong relation between the way we interact with people, and the way we see and conceptualize 'research objects'/'service users'. As Wacquant suggests,

> 'Either people are portrayed as maximizing computing machines pursuing their interests, or they're portrayed as symbolic animals that manipulate language and obey norms because they're members of a group… What's missing is that people are first and foremost embodied, carnal beings of blood and flesh who relate to the world in a passionate way.'[5]

[5] Interview for The New York Times (Eakin 2003).

On the other hand, when a need for a more in depth immersion is felt, it opens a window of opportunity to engage and to develop a more sensitive and engaged approach. The professional immersion is a very efficient strategy for understanding the existing demand, as well as for strengthening the professional engagement with its field of action. It is a challenge, but at the same time it is a chance to develop a set of skills through the need to adapt or create tools to work within the conditions found in each context. Institutional environments are comfort zones that transmit apparent safety and protection for both professionals and users. However it is necessary to explore relationships outwith such settings in order to allow more in depth understanding of situations. For this reason, the observation, interaction and work with marginalised groups have to be carried out in various environments (such as the street, home, school, in the institutions/projects in which they attend). This approximation in addition to strengthening the bonds of trust provides greater subsidies to intervention and the development of the professional.

The positive and dynamic approach

Persistency is a key attitude in providing support with a positive and humanised approach. A positive approach in context which involves the world of drugs gangs as defined by Rodriguez (2013) occurs through the exploitation of the potential for change of each human being and the constant motivation to follow with new projects in the future. The recognition of their knowledge and the extension of their networks of contacts are also part of this type of activity and contribute to the denaturing of the idea that there is 'no way out'. In fact when the professional 'feels' a connection to the problem there is a stronger commitment to engage in a process of social change (Rodriguez 2013).

The positive and dynamic approach in these cases is also reflected in the persistent approach in which the professional engages with the life changing processes even when the youngsters do not appear to want to change. This is crucial due to the circumstances involved in the process of making life changes necessary in the escape route from drug trafficking. As the process of disengaging from a gang involves distinct stages and is gradual, it is common for oscillations to occur during the way out process. The oscillatory feelings and actions may be explained by the difficulties in accessing other networks to belong to where youngsters can feel welcome and identify with in a similar way to that in which the gang would offer. In addition to this, there are also other barriers that are linked to stigma and the consequent doubts about a possible adaptation to life outside crime, but what needs to be highlighted is the decisive role in terms of the persistent care of the professionals and their practices in these situations.

Persevering with the intervention even in cases in which the participant initially declares that he is satisfied with his choice of life, proved to be an effective and meaningful technique for them. Feedback obtained during the Escape Routes program demanded a re-think of the criterion

common to social projects that aims to invest only in subjects in whom a clear desire to exit criminal life has been manifested. We have learned that in many cases the attitude of not expressing this desire initially can be linked to the inability of these young people to perceive the existence of possible alternatives for them as well as the fear of failure. In this case, the insistence and the approximation of constant professional services serves to help them to believe that they are capable of doing something else and makes them feel important in fact, to the extent that the professional did not give up on them which motivates them to follow in the direction of the exit of trafficking.

The importance of networking and multidisciplinary work

We believe that the professional must constantly qualify its intervention from studies and surveys that seek to expand his knowledge of the realities in which he operates. Beyond that, it is necessary to increase professional intellectualisation, which means the incorporation of a critical professional consciousness in contrast to 'training' acquired both at university and during professional development opportunities. Of course 'training' itself is important to perform professions. However, there exists a clear need to create more opportunities for reflexive practice within the institutions. This must encompass discussion of the historical factors which have culminated in the social problems currently experienced in addition to supervisory meetings to discuss the place of emotions during the job.

Contextual analysis and studies involving professionals from different areas is also important. Working with this perspective the professional recognizes that you can never know everything and develop strategies beyond the borders of a specific area of expertise. This maturation also involves the richness of the field in which professional boundaries are confronted in the face of complex issues. The realisation that we should not work alone when dealing with analysis of complex issues does not isolate the professional within their specific field of expertise or institution, on the contrary it promotes the desire to instigate partnerships.

The work from this perspective of *training and active learning* (Rodriguez 2013) considers the importance of interdisciplinary working as well as making the effort to hear what the members of the community have to say about their problems. Such initiatives break down the hierarchy of knowledge and power to promote the exchange of different points of view in a dialogical process. In this case, it is of fundamental importance to be open to listening to non-experts and also to acknowledge that learning from life experience is of essential importance not only in producing evidence but also to hear established views on the problems.

Both at Observatory of Favelas and at Redes da Mare there was a systematic concern in providing an open environment for discussions. It usually involved a diverse range of settings, from a more academic format (involving reading groups, for instance) to more flexible and open

approaches (such as movies and arts as a way of expression and dialogue). The fact these institutions were based in a favela was another relevant aspect of this professional learning that could be inspirational for other organizations and even university groups. By experiencing day-to-day elements of life in favelas, professionals were able to develop connections and an understanding that would not be possible in planned visits. This model is also very common in Brazilian universities when developing 'university extension' programmes that give students and researchers an opportunity to engage within communities more organically and reflect critically upon their 'academic thought' by practicing and interacting with local people.

Building participants' autonomy

Acting in a perspective that seeks the construction of autonomy is based on the belief that youngsters were not passively 'co-opted'. Moreover, they should be understood as subjects who at a given moment of their lives, and having been influenced by a number of factors, have faced drug trafficking as an option in light of very limited possibilities in their lives. Such consideration is important to consider active choices rather than the passive result of social processes. It of course involves complex situations such as maturity, alternatives and social context. However it offers a framework to understand choice as an active process performed by social agents. With this, we demystify the belief that they will be 'saved' without considering their active participation and responsibility in their life change process. With this we avoid a 'rescuer' approach that is still very common among 'well-intentioned' professionals willing to help youngsters to leave the drug trafficking.

When the idea of being 'rescued' fails to the ground a greater sense of personal responsibility is required. This type of intervention involves recognizing them as protagonists in the formulation of proposals to transform their realities. For this reason, the professional has to design solutions with the participation of the youngster. It is necessary to construct the proposals along with the person from the outset, to invest in strengthening their resilience and capacity as well as to develop a critical awareness of his own situation.

Urban-minded reflexive model

Another important approach is what we could call 'urban-minded reflexive model'. Such an approach requires the incorporation of an 'urban sensitivity'[6] in order to understand the wider context in which people live and interact. It also considers the extent people use and appropriate the spaces in the city by defining their socio-spatial identities under the socio-economic, political and symbolical constrains that define power relationships in the urban environment. In other words it regards to the construction of 'territories' and 'territorialities' in the city. This is particularly relevant because projects directed towards the 'poor' or to specific groups tend to

[6] Or in a wider sense, what the geographer David Harvey calls 'geographic imagination' (Harvey, 1973).

focus on the 'community' as an isolated entity, disconnected from the wider urban fabric. In our view, a better understanding of the urban dynamics and the processes of socio-spatial segregation is important although usually ignored by professionals whose training is focused on individuals or groups as the main instance of intervention.

This model highlights the urban environment as an aspect for consideration and considers 'the right to the city' (Lefebvre 1961; see also Fernandes 2005) as an essential dimension. As an integrated part of this, we understand that professionals should work with the idea of 'urban-self-esteem' as a strategy to provide individuals and groups with a sense of belonging to the wider society. Some basic examples include the incorporation of 'mobility and accessibility' (Fernandes 2009)[7] into research (for instance, mental maps, exploration of physical and symbolical boundaries, territoriality) as well as practice (through development of activities outside the 'community'; interaction with groups from other backgrounds) in order to develop an urban awareness.

The 'intellectual' behind the 'professional'

Henry Giroux's work on critical pedagogy (Giroux 2011) offers a seminal reflection upon the role of teachers as provocative critical thinkers rather than instructors. He understands that universities should function as sites of struggle where students can access new modes of teaching, social relations and thoughts that contest the status quo. Giroux sees educators as intellectuals 'willing to connect pedagogy with the problems of public life, committed to civic courage, and the demands of social responsibility' (Giroux 2011, p. 6). In a similar manner, we see every professional, irrespective of his/her field of work as an 'educator' with the potential to transform their institutions, reshape service delivery as well as develop new modes of work that can inspire others to change. By extension, it can also influence policy design through the development of innovative approaches with positive impact for society.

Performance as an intellectual is a matter of professional attitudes that have to include a permanent self-reflection upon practices as well as a critical understanding of what is behind things. In such, the idea of being an intellectual sits in the level of engagement, responsibility and commitment to change. As a result, the 'intellectualisation' of professional practice involves the development of a reflexive process that has to be underpinned by a critical understanding of social reality. It can only be achieved when you think beyond the problems of day-to-day practice but without ignoring the relevance of everyday practice.

[7] In the way it has been explored in this research (Fernandes, 2009), 'mobility and accessibility' are much more than physical displacement in the city. It also involves a range of social abilities that are subject to stigma, prejudice and self-esteem. This is why 'urban self-esteem' is so important to overcome such constrains.

A framework to conduct research and work marginalised groups

What we suggest in the table below is a summary of ideas developed in this paper. We hope it works as a facilitator to a reflexive process of engagement with marginalised groups wherever you are a researcher, a practitioner or both. We expect to suggest some ideas that can be a guide for professional practice.

Key approaches	Strategies/operation	Questioning our practices and attitudes
Humanisation of the way we conceive, perceive and see people	- Open gaze; do not demonise; do not see people as threatening - Treat as a human being, an equal - Be sensitive to people's life trajectory - Welcome, listen, don't judge, create a bond of trust	- To what extent are you acting with subtle prejudice driven by your own pre-conceived values, worldviews, cultural background and class position? - Are you prepared to communicate in a way which promotes a dialogue rather than a monologue? If so, what language and codes are you adopting? Do you acknowledge/adopt/adapt the ways of communication used by marginalised groups?
Not being restricted to the confines of institutions	- Leave the comfort zone - Meet with the participants in various contexts (home, street, school, etc.) – visit and get to know places that they go - Practice the art of 'taking off' socio-economic and cultural lenses that may interfere with the ability to understand context - Develop skills of adaptation of work in each context to be studied or to intervene - Develop a capacity to be flexible and adopt a good sense approach - Be daring, creative, open to what is not familiar, be open to differences - Practical outcome: increase the bond of trust	- Is there a good balance between theory and practice? - How open minded you are? Are you able to 'think outside the box' and seek for alternative ways to work that may be more exhaustive and time consuming? - Is there a good balance between the 'professional' and the 'human being' in your practice? - How flexible are you to re-think established practices?
Networking and multi-disciplinary work	- Create opportunities for reflexive practice that enables a professional critical consciousness - Invest in interdisciplinary work and networking - Look for problems beyond the boundaries of a specific field of knowledge - Work with mixed teams (including people from the community) - Listen to the community, create channels of active interlocution - Be able to communicate in a sensitive and dialogical manner	- Do you network? Is your networking helping to address problems you alone cannot resolve? - Are you engaging with other professional fields? What is your level of communication, interaction and exchanging?

	- Develop a 'political sensitivity' to engage with problems	
Build participant autonomy	- Starting from the understanding that participants are agents of their choices. - They are not entirely co-opted or passively pushed by structural problems. - Seek co-participation and accountability in the process of changing lives	- Who is the directly responsible for life changes? The person we are working with or the professionals supporting him/her? Both are, but there is a degree of responsibility. The main agent of change is the person. But how to reinforce such responsibility within the life changing process at same time support is offered? In other words, how to increase independence when some degree of dependence (on service, support, welfare, etc) is still necessary?
Deconstruction of myths about the professional activities	- Deconstruct myths: the 'rescue professional', 'the one who does not know anything' - Expect the interaction to be different from idealised views. Be open and flexible to listen to different expectations in relation to your intervention. However be clear with the limits of your actions. - Review your values and representations about your practice. Position yourself in a different manner to see reality through another's eyes.	- Are you aware of your professional, personal and emotional limitations?
Urban-minded reflexive model	- Consideration of 'the right to the city' and 'urban self-esteem' as part of a wider understanding of problems that sit beyond individuals and isolated territorial entities. - Incorporation of mobility and accessibility into research (for instance, mental maps, exploration of physical and symbolical boundaries, territoriality) - Incorporation of mobility and accessibility in practice (through development of activities outside the 'community'; interaction with groups from other backgrounds) - In some situations, the idea of 'community' means socio-spatial enclosure. We need to be careful with the use of such concept in particular when it is addressing actions at very local level.	- Is there room for the incorporation of the notions/concepts of 'space', 'territory' and 'territoriality' in your reflective practice? - What are your 'scales' of analysis and intervention?

The 'intellectual' behind the 'professional'	- Capacity to 'read' and understand situations in a critical perspective - Being able to reflect theoretically on practice with a good understanding of the key authors in your area - Assume an attitude for change based on a sense of social justice, passion and love - Be able to sustain and defend your ideas with confidence - Fight the culture of pragmatism with a critical and reflective practice	- Do you pursue a utopia? - Is there room for imagination and creativity in your work? - Are you reserving the necessary time to read? What have you been reading? - What ideas are underpinning your attitudes and practice? - Do you (and your group) have a moment to reflect upon your practice? - How are you recording/systematising your work? Are you able to share and disseminate your lessons learnt to a diverse audience?

Reflexive pathways and the role of institutions: final words

The most important lesson we can learn from the Brazilian experience lies in the way we engage with groups and individuals. It is very important to remove the layers that prevent passionate and humanised engagement. It is similarly relevant to reflect upon the idea of 'engagement' in order to identify the moral and political commitment behind it. The development of such skills is not easy, and demands the repositioning of views, values and practices. For this, the first challenge lies in the perceptions professionals, researchers and institutions produce about such groups, as well as the views individuals have of themselves. By changing attitudes and incorporating transformative practices into day-to-day engagement, it may be possible to gradually change institutional attitudes and individual aspirations towards more positive outcomes.

One of the key points we addressed in this paper was the need to develop a humanised gaze that results in a passionate engagement. We also highlighted the relevance of research and action with the theme of marginality as part of a commitment to a cause which goes beyond the 'professional' or 'researcher', having foremost a duty towards citizenship and humanity.

But how do we develop such approaches in practical terms? We understand that most of professional and research engagement is part of world's views and values that are acquired during a lifespan, and that depends on the specific experience and level of openness each person has. However, some institutions have the capacity to push professionals for a more civic, humanistic and passionate engagement. We believe that both employer and educational institutions have a duty to offer a framework for social change. However, work environments tend to offer fewer opportunities to act upon demands for intervention. In contrast, universities can offer a relevant arena to reflect upon and develop a critical and independent voice to influence public opinion, policy and practice.

There are two complementary paths to be followed here. The first regards the reflexive spaces working settings should provide for their professionals. The experience we reported from Observatório de Favelas and Redes da Maré shows that it is possible to create space for reflection and to develop creative and innovative ways to engage and work with marginalised groups. From simple documentary screenings to reading groups, such spaces can create a critical and reflexive environment that will push professionals to reflect upon their practices at the same way they will have the opportunity to confront their ideas and perceptions with other colleagues. However, this is the kind of critical awareness process that not every institution is open to or keen to promote. In this case, the role of professional leadership can prove pivotal in transforming institutions from inside.

The other path is the professional formation offered by universities. Universities have the potential to offer much more than 'professional training'. The development of critical awareness among students is of essential relevance to form professionals with independent views. In order for that to happen universities should move from a 'training' path towards an 'educational' path in which training is offered alongside a reflexive process of intellectualisation of professionals. This is related not only to classroom experience, but also to the experiences acquired from engagement with marginalised groups. Here the model of 'university extension' from Brazilian universities offers an interesting framework in which teaching and research are engaged with a collaborative agenda that involves a dialogical process of exchanging between universities and marginalised groups. 'University extension' is an opportunity to build on research and teaching practices by experiencing new forms of interaction, communication and learning with the world outside of academia; a way to engage with the social inequality agenda through the involvement of non-academics in a dialogical process. It is a driving force for public engagement and an

inductor for projects addressing social exclusion. It is a strategic concept to reflect on the role of universities on concept and design of public policies (Oliveira, 2004). It involves the 'transformative relation' (Freire, 1983) that enables a process of reflection upon university research and teaching agenda in a way to engage students and researchers within a transformative practice.[8]

The work with individuals who are part of a very stigmatised and criminalised group is challenging, and involves the responsibility of showing other visions beyond the image of a problem without a solution. With this paper we hope to contribute to the construction of new representations and practices with young people from favelas who got involved with the drug trade. Broadly, we hope such experiences from Brazil are shared widely in a way in which engages professionals and researchers in a more passionate and humanised perspective with the theme of marginality. In fact, to genuinely engage with the theme of marginality it is necessary to confront pre-conceived ideas and values that underpin idealised research methods and professional practice. It involves a reflexive process in which passionate engagement is a driving force for transformative practices. Such engagement is not only a matter of human interaction, but also a matter of institutional attitudes that should create opportunities for reflexive practice and critical awareness. In this case we highlight the public role of some institutions in engaging with social change, in which universities in particular have the capacity to interfere on professional formation and knowledge production by being committed to engaging with the social justice agenda.

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[8] We can also mention the Dutch 'science shops' as an interesting model in which universities engage with civil society. 'Science shops' offer students and researchers opportunities to actively collaborate with disadvantaged groups. They also push universities to reflect upon their research agenda in a way to redistribute research outcomes in the society (Farkas 1999; Wachelder 2003). The difference from 'university extension' sits in the fact 'science shops' are funded in the idea of democratisation of science through research oriented activities. 'University extension' for its turn operates in complement to research and teaching, and addresses activities that usually are based in collaborative practice such as community work and participatory action research (although the last is also find in some 'science shops' experiences).

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